

# Deservingness and Welfare Attitudes Through Young Eyes: The Future of the Swiss Welfare State

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## Abstract

This article demonstrates the value of including youth in deservingness and welfare attitude research by investigating Swiss adolescents' deservingness opinions and welfare attitudes (N = 1601, mean age = 14.6). Through a survey experiment focusing on different unemployed groups and unemployment-related policies, the study revisits prominent research results like the immigrant deservingness gap from a novel perspective, generating insights relevant within and beyond the Swiss context. First, deservingness is a vital predictor of attitudes towards social rights and obligations already in younger years. Moreover, while some patterns of adult-centred studies are replicated (older unemployed are seen as more deserving than younger unemployed), there are also stark deviations: EU unemployed living in Switzerland are not seen as less deserving than Swiss unemployed. More research focusing on youth can enhance the social legitimacy of policies, clarify the relationship between deservingness and welfare attitudes, and potentially indicate what to expect from the future of the welfare state.

## KEYWORDS

Impressionable years, Social legitimacy, Welfare attitudes, Welfare deservingness, Youth attitudes

## Résumé

Cet article démontre qu'il est pertinent d'inclure les jeunes dans la recherche sur le mérite (*deservingness*) et les attitudes envers l'État-providence, via une enquête expérimentale réalisée en Suisse (N = 1601, âge moyen = 14,6). L'enquête, axée sur les politiques liées au chômage, permet de réexaminer des résultats établis,

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tels que l'écart de mérite des immigré.e.s. Premièrement, le mérite est un prédicteur clé des attitudes envers les droits et devoirs sociaux, dès le plus jeune âge. Si certains résultats des études centrées sur les adultes sont reproduits (les personnes âgées au chômage sont considérées comme plus méritantes que les jeunes au chômage), cette étude révèle des écarts importants: les personnes européennes (UE) au chômage vivant en Suisse sont considérées comme aussi méritantes que leurs homologues suisses. Des recherches plus approfondies axées sur la jeunesse offrirait des perspectives nouvelles sur la légitimité sociale des politiques publiques, la relation entre le mérite et les attitudes envers l'aide sociale, et l'avenir de l'État-providence.

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel verdeutlicht den Mehrwert des Einbezugs von Jugendlichen in die Forschung zu *Deservingness* und wohlfahrtsstaatlichen Einstellungen mittels einer Befragung von Jugendlichen in der Schweiz (N=1601, Durchschnittsalter=14,6). Mithilfe eines Umfrageexperiments zu unterschiedlichen arbeitslosen Gruppen werden bekannte Forschungsergebnisse (wie z.B. die tiefere *Deservingness* von MigrantInnen), aus einer neuen Perspektive beleuchtet. Die Ergebnisse sind relevant für den Schweizer Kontext und darüber hinaus. *Deservingness* ist bereits in jungen Jahren ein wesentlicher Prädiktor für Einstellungen zu sozialen Rechten und Pflichten. Während einige Muster erwachsenenzentrierter Studien repliziert werden (ältere Arbeitslose werden als verdienstvoller angesehen als jüngere Arbeitslose), gibt es jedoch auch starke Abweichungen: Arbeitslose mit EU-Pass, die in der Schweiz leben, werden nicht als weniger verdienstvoll angesehen als Schweizer Arbeitslose. Mehr Forschung mit Jugendlichen kann die soziale Legitimität von Politiken erhöhen, die Beziehung zwischen *Deservingness* und wohlfahrtsstaatlichen Einstellungen schärfen und womöglich Einsicht über die Zukunft des Wohlfahrtsstaates geben.

### Riassunto

Questo articolo evidenzia il valore del coinvolgimento dei giovani nella ricerca sulla *deservingness* e sugli atteggiamenti verso lo stato sociale mediante un'indagine su giovani in Svizzera (N=1601, età media: 14,6). Utilizzando un sondaggio su diversi gruppi di disoccupati vengono esaminati risultati noti, come il divario di *deservingness* tra migranti, da una nuova prospettiva, generando risultati rilevanti nel contesto svizzero. La *deservingness* è già in giovane età un predittore degli atteggiamenti verso i diritti e i doveri sociali. Vengono

replicati alcuni schemi di studi sugli adulti (i disoccupati anziani sono considerati più *deserving* dei giovani), ma ci sono anche deviazioni: i disoccupati con passaporto UE in Svizzera non sono considerati meno *deserving* dei disoccupati svizzeri. Ulteriori ricerche con i giovani possono aumentare la legittimità sociale delle politiche, affinare la relazione tra *deservingness* e atteggiamenti verso lo stato sociale e fornire una visione sul futuro dello stato sociale.

## INTRODUCTION

The question of *who should get what, and why* has once again a prominent spot on political agendas across Europe, making it relevant to study the social legitimacy of targeted welfare (van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). Welfare deservingness is a central concept in this regard, capturing the extent to which target groups are seen as deserving of social welfare. It is a useful analytical lens for understanding public support for the social rights and obligations of target groups (see Laenen, 2020; Meuleman et al., 2017; van Oorschot, 2006; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). It helps explain why policies for some target groups are more generous than for others (Laenen, 2020). Scholars and policymakers can use recurring deservingness results to assess the legitimacy of current policies and anticipate public support for policy changes. The deservingness of benefit recipients is also linked to success in social policy implementation (Afonso & Papadopoulos, 2015).

While existing research provides valuable insights into how deservingness considerations inform welfare support decisions, most in-depth deservingness studies focus on adult perspectives. The lack of studies explicitly focusing on children and youth is a significant oversight. Given that experiences in the *impressionable years* influence welfare attitude stability and change across the lifespan (Neundorf & Soroka, 2018), understanding young people's views might offer foresight into future trends or generational shifts that could challenge existing social policy norms. Revisiting existing deservingness research through the lens of youth can also provide new insights into how *deservingness opinions* influence social welfare support, potentially refining welfare deservingness theory (van Oorschot et al., 2017). Lastly, the overview is societally relevant: the lack of consideration of young people's preferences in political and policy decision-making processes alongside low levels of political representation in parliaments and cabinets feeds into a vicious circle of youth political alienation (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022, 2023).

This study addresses this gap by investigating Swiss adolescents' (mean age = 14.60) deservingness opinions and welfare attitudes from 14 cantons of the German-speaking part of Switzerland (N = 1601). Besides studying more general deservingness opinions (e.g., primary target group rankings), a survey experiment is implemented varying several deservingness and welfare attitude items towards different unemployed groups (secondary target group level).

The study contributes to the existing literature in multiple ways. It is the first to directly investigate deservingness opinions, welfare attitudes and their relationship among underaged participants. Moreover, clearly distinguishing between deservingness opinions and welfare attitudes (see Laenen, 2020) generates more fine-grained insights into the mechanisms between deservingness and welfare support. Third, the comprehensive survey experiment allows for a revisit of established results (e.g., *migrant deservingness gap*) from a novel perspective and enables causal inference about young people's views and preferences on different unemployment groups and benefits. Overall, while methodologically limited in predicting the future of

the Swiss welfare state, the study demonstrates the importance of considering young people's views on *who should get what and why*.

The following sections first dig into young people's political preferences more generally before turning to their deservingness opinions and why they might differ from those of adults. This is followed by the empirical design of the study and a presentation and discussion of the results.

## POLITICAL PREFERENCES AND THE IMPRESSIONABLE YEARS

Previous research demonstrated that the *impressionable* years between childhood and adolescence<sup>1</sup> are a crucial phase for developing political preferences and orientations (Jennings, 1979, 1990; Neundorf & Smets, 2017; Sears & Brown, 2023). While attitudes can still change later in life,<sup>2</sup> for example, due to important life-cycle events (e.g., parenthood: Jennings, 1979), some orientations like partisan predispositions and (implicit) racial attitudes tend to persist once established early in life (see Baron, 2015; Dražanová, 2022; Sears & Brown, 2023).

When looking at who and what influences young people in their *impressionable years*, parents are strong candidates (Jennings, 1984; Jennings et al., 2009; Jennings & Niemi, 1968, 1981; Rico & Jennings, 2016, but see: Beck & Jennings, 1991; Dinas, 2014). Research also points to schools, peers, media, political events, and the economic and institutional context (e.g., Neundorf et al., 2016; Neundorf & Soroka, 2018; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Sears & Valentino, 1997; Tedin, 1980; Wattenberg, 2020).

Whereas some of those agencies mostly affect individuals, broader shared context and experiences can lead to persisting *generational* or *cohort* effects, i.e., attitudinal differences “attributable to the common ‘imprinting’ of cohort members” (Markus, 1983, p. 718; also: Jennings, 1990; Niemi & Sobieszek, 1977). Research with young people in their *impressionable years* can thus offer a snapshot of the current *zeitgeist*, helping to anticipate and explain attitudinal change and stability in the future. For example, the existence of a welfare state during the *impressionable years* impacts how people's social policy attitudes change in response to economic hardships later in life (Neundorf & Soroka, 2018). However, disentangling the effects attributable to age, period, and cohorts remains a mathematical and conceptual problem (Bell, 2020; also: Niemi & Sobieszek, 1977). The statistical models require data over an extended period and strong theory-based assumptions, underscoring the relevance of a comprehensive understanding of young people's attitudes and the drivers shaping them.

While there is extensive research on young people's political attitudes, studies on their welfare attitudes and their determinants are scarce (see Neundorf & Soroka, 2018, for a notable exception). This is also true for the growing body of research on welfare deservingness, which is identified as a crucial individual-level determinant of welfare attitudes in adults (Laenen, 2020; Meuleman et al., 2017; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). This study addresses this gap by focusing on young people's *deservingness opinions* and how they relate to their welfare attitudes. It is important to note, however, that the cross-sectional design of the study prohibits conclusively revealing generational or cohort effects. The following

<sup>1</sup>It is hard to pinpoint the exact span of the *impressionable* years. However, a consensus is that they likely begin much earlier than early adulthood (Neundorf & Smets, 2017). Studies show that children in primary school can already display signs of political knowledge, political orientations, and sensitivity to political events (e.g., Bartels & Jackman, 2014; Deth et al., 2011).

<sup>2</sup>There is scholarly debate about attitude change and stability over the life course contrasting different perspectives: long-term stability after the *impressionable years*, lifelong openness and change due to life-cycle events (see Sears & Brown, 2023).

section will first examine existing deservingness research before turning to how and why young people's deservingness opinions might differ from those of adults and whether those differences might last.

## DESERVINGNESS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

### Insights from welfare deservingness research with adults

Welfare deservingness describes the extent to which target groups are seen as worthy of social welfare. It is a strong predictor of support for the social rights and obligations of target groups (Laenen, 2020; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). Relying on deservingness considerations to decide on welfare support is a heuristic said to be rooted in our evolutionary past to distinguish the *lazy* from the *unlucky* in small-scale help relationships (Petersen, 2012, 2015; Petersen et al., 2011, 2012). Nowadays, it is suggested that people apply the broader CARIN criteria set to assess deservingness: *Control*, *Attitude*, *Reciprocity*, *Identity*, and *Need* (van Oorschot, 2000, 2006). The overall deservingness of target groups is determined by two kinds of deservingness opinions: *deservingness perceptions* (criteria-scorings) and *deservingness valuations* (criteria-weightings or importance) (Laenen, 2020). For example, in assessing the unemployed, *deservingness perceptions* include perceptions of whether the unemployed are responsible for being unemployed (*control*), are grateful for help (*attitude*), their past and expected future contributions (*reciprocity*), their level of *need*, and how 'close' the evaluator feels to the unemployed (*identity*). *Deservingness valuations* are about how important people deem the criteria. For example, one person might see *reciprocity* as most important, while another might think that the level of *need* is more crucial for determining help. Thus, even when people have similar *deservingness perceptions*, they may reach different overall judgements due to different prioritisations (*valuations*). Importantly, *deservingness perceptions* and *valuations* vary based on ideological and socio-demographic characteristics, the institutional, political and cultural context, and the target group and policy under consideration (Meuleman et al., 2020; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017).

Interestingly, if people differentiate between the deservingness of target groups, they tend to end up with similar rankings (see Laenen & Meuleman, 2017; van Oorschot, 2006). The elderly, the sick and the disabled are regularly seen as most deserving, followed by families with children. Groups perceived as less deserving are the unemployed, social assistance recipients, and migrants. Consistent with those rankings, policies are more generous and tied to less strict obligations for groups perceived as more deserving (Laenen, 2020). Moreover, people also differentiate between secondary target groups. For example, the unemployed are not perceived as a homogenous group (Buss, 2019; Larsen, 2008b; Naumann et al., 2020). Older unemployed are consistently seen as more deserving than younger unemployed, accompanied by support for stronger obligations and less generous benefits for younger unemployed (e.g., Buss, 2019; Larsen, 2008b; Naumann et al., 2020).

The deservingness rankings are explained through the deservingness criteria. For example, the elderly are perceived to have contributed more to society (*reciprocity*) than other target groups like the unemployed (van Oorschot, 2000). Similarly, older unemployed are assumed to score higher on *reciprocity* than younger unemployed; moreover, they are seen as less in *control* of their situation due to fewer chances of reemployment at the end of their careers (Buss, 2019; Dordoni & Argentero, 2015; Larsen, 2008b; Roosma & Jeene, 2017). Younger unemployed also tend to score worse on *attitude* ('ungrateful youth', Larsen, 2008b). Notably, previous research identified a *deservingness gap for migrants*; they are perceived as less deserving than non-migrants, regardless of similar contributions or behavioural missteps (Kootstra, 2016, 2017; Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019). The gap is

argued to be *inevitable* as it persists even under highly favourable behaviour, like showing a strong effort to reintegrate into the labour market (Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019; also: Gilens, 1999).

## Hypotheses

It is unclear whether young people also rely on deservingness considerations to inform their welfare support decisions, and if they do, whether their *deservingness opinions* differ from those of adults.

### Young people's use of the deservingness heuristic

Starting with the first question, if distinguishing between more and less deserving members of society to determine help is indeed rooted in our evolutionary past (Petersen, 2012, 2015; Petersen et al., 2012), young people should also use deservingness considerations to inform welfare support decisions. This should be the case for attitudes regarding social rights and obligations, as the causal logic connecting *deservingness opinions* with attitudes on social rights also seems to apply to social obligations, effectively constituting “two sides of the same coin” (Laenen & Meuleman, 2019; also: Roosma & Jeene, 2017). Moreover, scholars demonstrated that deservingness holds explanatory value when accounting for other important explanatory frameworks like performance evaluations, self-interest, political ideology and values (e.g., Cook & Barrett, 1992; Gilens, 1999; Laenen, 2020).

**H1.** Young people will rely on deservingness considerations to determine welfare support. This will apply to attitudes on social rights (H1a) and obligations (H1b).

### Deservingness opinions of young people

Turning to the second question, young people will likely assess the overall deservingness of some target groups differently than adults. Differences may arise from variations in *deservingness perceptions* (criteria-scorings), *valuations* (criteria-weightings/ importance) or a combination of the two. However, the long-term implications of differences depend on their stability: Will they fade over time due to ageing or life-cycle events, or do they represent (early) signs of generational change? Both are plausible since *perceptions* and *valuations* are influenced by individual socio-demographic characteristics but also by the broader cultural, political and economic context (see Laenen, 2020; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017).

One primary target group that young people may view differently is the elderly. Firstly, those yet to enter the labour market might place less emphasis on *reciprocity*, a criterion typically contributing to the picture of a highly deserving elderly due to assumptions of past contributions (van Oorschot, 2000). Additionally, contextual changes such as demographic ageing may lead to re-evaluations of the elderly through mechanisms of age-based self-interest (Kweon & Choi, 2021, but see Goerres et al., 2020). For instance, relative inequalities across generations could alter young people's perceptions of the elderly as a group in financial *need* (see van Oorschot, 2000, 2006). The “generational contract”<sup>3</sup> (Svallfors et al., 2012, p. 159) embedded

<sup>3</sup>The generational contract is an implicit agreement where the working population supports the (very) young and old through financial mechanisms, expecting similar support in their old age. It inherently carries the potential for intergenerational conflicts, particularly if old-age support is perceived as burdensome or when younger generations have doubts about the sustainability of the old-age policies for their future (Svallfors, 2008; for a systematic literature review: Zechner & Sihto, 2023).

within the welfare state becomes progressively less rewarding in ageing societies, potentially causing young people to view current old age support as relatively good compared to what they can expect. Similar effects might be caused by the increasingly challenging housing market for younger generations compared to older generations ('generation rent': Hoolachan et al., 2017; McKee, 2012). Whereas these reasons suggest a decrease in the elderly's deservingness, this should not be the case for other highly deserving groups like the disabled or the sick. After all, young people should also adhere to the 'built-in bias' to view sickness as randomly caused and, hence, the sick as highly deserving (Jensen & Petersen, 2017, p. 71).

**H2.** Young people will perceive the elderly as less deserving, ranking them below other target groups usually perceived as highly deserving, like the sick and disabled.

While the elderly could be seen as less deserving by young people, other primary target groups like the unemployed and social assistance recipients could be seen as more deserving. These groups usually score poorly on *reciprocity*, especially on perceptions that they do not want to find a job (Buffel & Van de Velde, 2019; Furåker & Blomsterberg, 2003; Hills, 2002). Simultaneously, the unemployed and particularly social assistance recipients are perceived to have high financial *needs* (Blomberg et al., 2017; Larsen, 2006). If reciprocity is less important among youth enrolled in schools, the need-based assessment could be more important for the overall judgement, lifting the deservingness 'floor':

**H3.** Young people will see social assistance recipients as more deserving, not ranking them below the unemployed, unlike in previous studies conducted on the general population.

Differences could also exist for assessments of secondary target groups like younger and older unemployed. As described above, adult-centred studies paint a rather harsh picture of the younger unemployed compared to the older unemployed. It is unclear to what extent this would be similar among young people. On the one hand, young individuals might feel *closer* and thus more sympathetic to younger unemployed simply from an age standpoint. Moreover, self-interest considerations (see Sherif, 1988) could come into play, considering that young people often face unstable employment at the beginning of their careers (e.g., Hardgrove et al., 2015; Stuth & Jahn, 2020). At the same time, this logic might not apply to young people without labour market experience who have not faced precarious employment. Furthermore, this may be even less likely in countries with low (youth) unemployment, as this reduces the likelihood of contact with people who had difficulties re-entering the labour market. Young people then might not feel close to any group of unemployed people, especially if they perceive themselves as not at risk of future unemployment. While young people's judgements could then likely mirror those of adults, the deservingness differences between older and younger unemployed may still be slightly less pronounced among youth when assuming less emphasis on the *reciprocity* criterion:

**H4.** Young people will perceive older unemployed as more deserving than younger unemployed.

Lastly, it is worth turning to unemployed migrants, who are regularly perceived as the least deserving target group. Besides *identity*, research points to *reciprocity* and *control* as key criteria to explain this position (Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019; also: Kootstra, 2016). (Unemployed) migrants are usually perceived to score low on *reciprocity* (Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019; Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2012), both on future contributions (e.g., migrants have to face incomplete employment trajectories more often than non-migrants, see

Kogan, 2006) and past contributions (more limited time to contribute to the country of destination). Putting less weight on *reciprocity* might thus shift focus towards other criteria like *identity*. For *identity*, an interesting contrast emerges: While solidarity decreases with cultural distance (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015), younger people are often portrayed as more tolerant and open to migration (e.g., Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Thus, they may adopt a *broader* understanding of solidarity and *identity*. At the same time, these trends are not necessarily attributable to *age per se*. Instead, scholars argue for cohort effects (Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2018; Schotte & Winkler, 2018), influenced by the political and societal climate and the presence of anti-immigration sentiments during the *impressionable years* (Jeannot & Dražanová, 2019; McLaren & Paterson, 2020). The implications are intriguing: if openness and solidarity towards migrants are not something young people will ‘outgrow’, the *inevitable deservingness gap* may be resolved over time by upcoming generations. However, if context matters, this should only be the case in countries where migration is not a divisive topic. Consequently, in places where migration is hotly debated, the *inevitable deservingness gap* may not resolve over time but could be fuelled by formative experiences during childhood and adolescence. For the Swiss context investigated in this study, hypothesis 5 can thus be formulated as follows:

**H5.** To the extent that migration is hotly debated in Switzerland, young people are expected to perceive unemployed migrants as less deserving than unemployed non-migrants.

## METHODS

### Data collection and sample

This study employs a cross-sectional survey among secondary school students in German-speaking Switzerland. 1711 secondary students from all school levels at the end of obligatory schooling (year 8/9) across 14 cantons were surveyed. The final analytical sample comprises 1601 participants (mean age: 14.60).<sup>4</sup> Two waves of data collection occurred between May and July 2022 and January and May 2023.<sup>5</sup> The survey was conducted online and completed in class (average completion time ~22 minutes).

The sampling strategy involved systematically contacting schools, whereby all eligible schools were contacted in smaller cantons and a probability-proportional-to-size sampling (see Rust, 2014) was used in bigger cantons.<sup>6</sup> Full class participation was sought to reduce participation bias and more accurately represent the population. Permission to systematically contact schools was granted through the respective educational authorities and departments. Participation of schools, classes, and students was voluntary and required the (age-appropriate) information and consent of the involved principals, teachers, and students. In addition, legal guardians were informed in writing about the participation. The students could withdraw from the study at any time (before, during or after participation) without negative consequences. The practices adopted for data confidentiality and security adhere strictly to the cantonal and federal data protection regulations, and the ethical and data protection approach was reviewed and approved by educational authorities.

<sup>4</sup>Students aborting the questionnaire before reaching all deservingness and welfare attitudes questions were excluded from the sample. This was equivalent to having filled out at least 4/5 of the questionnaire (fully completed questionnaire N = 1577).

<sup>5</sup>The sample includes students from all five geographical regions of German-speaking Switzerland: Zurich, Espace Midland (Berne, Fribourg, Solothurn); Northwestern Switzerland (Argovia); Eastern Switzerland (Glarus, Appenzell Outer Rhodes., St. Gall, Grisons); Central Switzerland (Lucerne, Obwald, Nidwald, Zug, Uri). The first round was only conducted in Argovia, Berne, Lucerne, St. Gall, and Zurich. Additional demographic information on the sample is detailed in Appendix A7.

<sup>6</sup>Schools for participation were chosen from strata based on the canton, school year and school type.

## Swiss context

Investigating youth in German-speaking Switzerland in 8th and 9th grade represents a suitable sample for the outlined hypotheses. The participants are still enrolled in mandatory schooling, which might cause a lower emphasis on *reciprocity*, as assumed in [H2](#), [H3](#), [H4](#), and [H5](#). Additionally, many of the contextual factors discussed earlier are present in Switzerland, such as stable and low unemployment rates ([H4](#)), difficulties of homeownership for younger generations (Jaberg, [2022](#)) and strong demographic ageing (BFS, [2023](#)) ([H2](#)). Moreover, Switzerland is an ideal case study to investigate the contrast of a supposedly more immigration-friendly youth in an immigration-sceptic political and societal climate ([H5](#)). In Switzerland, (EU-)migration is a politically and societally salient topic. Over the last decade, several referendums have been held on limiting migration, supported by the leading Swiss People's Party (SVP). The most recent referendum took place in September 2020, aiming at curbing EU migration. These votes were accompanied by media discourses and narratives about an endangered national identity and a weakened international position, often invoking populist rhetoric around internal societal divide and migration (Dolea et al., [2021](#)).

## Thematic focus

The survey focuses primarily on *deservingness opinions* and welfare attitudes on the unemployed and unemployment benefits, complemented by more general questions like primary target group rankings. Focusing on the unemployed is justified insofar as unemployment is a more prominent social risk for youth than old age or sickness. Moreover, *deservingness opinions* on the unemployed are particularly relevant in the Swiss context. Recent policy trends indicate that the enactment of retrenching reforms has predominantly been feasible when directed at groups perceived as less deserving (e.g., Afonso & Papadopoulos, [2015](#)).

## Survey item development

Where possible, the survey items were constructed using validated items or slight variations thereof to ensure maximum comprehensibility among the respondents. Rigorous pretesting was conducted to ensure the questionnaire was suitable for the envisaged population. This included a cognitive pretest using a ‘think-aloud’ method, allowing to identify and revise questions and terms that could be unclear or misunderstood (Lenzner et al., [2015](#)). This was followed by an additional pretest with four classes (year 8/9) in the canton of Bern (only baseline, N = 74). After completion, feedback was sought from the students regarding any difficulties in comprehension or functionality. No issues were raised with the deservingness and welfare attitudes items in the second pretest, which is why the results of the second pretest were incorporated into the final analytical sample.<sup>7</sup>

## Survey experiment

Besides asking all participants more general questions on deservingness and welfare attitudes, a survey experiment was implemented to explore how deservingness opinions and

<sup>7</sup>To ensure the robustness of the results, all analyses were also run on the data without the pretest sample. The results practically mirror those presented in the paper. The results can be obtained by contacting the corresponding author.

TABLE 1 Deservingness and welfare attitude items.

Deservingness items					
Primary Target Group level	Abbr.	Valid N	Experim. Modified	Sample	Answers
Overall Deservingness:	<i>OD<sub>prim</sub></i>		No (items are the same for all participants)	All cantons	1 to 5 (not deserving at all; fully deserving)
· Elderly		1580			
· Sick		1581			
· Disabled		1580			
· Families with children		1580			
· Unemployed		1585			
· Social assistance recipients		1575			
Secondary target group level (groups of unemployed)	Abbr.	Valid N	Experim. Modified	Sample	Answers
Deservingness criteria for secondary target groups (groups of unemployed):	<i>DC</i>		Yes (unemployed group is modified; one condition per participant):	All cantons	1 to 5 (do not agree at all; fully agree)
· Control <sup>R</sup>		282–394			
· Attitude <sup>R</sup>		284–395	I: Control (Unemployed)		
· Reciprocity past		282–394	II: Younger Unemployed		
· Reciprocity future <sup>R</sup>		280–394	III: Older Unemployed		
· Identity		282–393	IV: Swiss Unemployed		
· Need		282–394	V: EU Unemployed		
Overall Deservingness unemployed groups	<i>OD<sub>sec</sub></i>	286–394	Yes	All cantons	1 to 5 (not deserving at all; fully deserving)
Unrelated to target groups	Abbr.	Valid N	Experim. Modified	Sample	Answers
General deservingness principles	<i>GD</i>		No	2nd data round	1 to 5 (do not agree at all; fully agree)
· Control		540			
· Attitude		539			
· Reciprocity		537			
· Identity		540			
· Need		539			
Welfare attitude items					
Secondary target group level (groups of unemployed)	Abbr.	Valid N	Experim. Modified	Sample	Answers
Role of government:			Yes	All cantons	0 to 10 (0 no responsibility; 10 full responsibility)
· Living standard unemployed	<i>RgLS</i>	284–392			
· Job unemployed	<i>RgJob</i>	280–390			

(Continues)

**TABLE 1** (Continued)

Welfare attitude items					
Generosity:			Yes	All	
· Replacement rate	<i>RR</i>	283–394		cantons	· 0–100 (scale)
· Duration of unemployment benefits	<i>Dur</i>	270–361			· open answer
Obligations (benefit cuts for job refusal):			Yes	All	1 to 4 (lose all benefits; lose half; lose small part; keep all)
· don't want to move <sup>R</sup>	<i>ObMove</i>	280–390		cantons	
· take a worse paid job <sup>R</sup>	<i>ObPay</i>	280–392			
· take a job requiring a lower educational level <sup>R</sup>	<i>ObEdu</i>	275–390			
Social investment: cuts in unemployment benefits to increase spending on training/ education			Yes	All	1 to 4 (strongly disagree; strongly agree)
	<i>SI</i>	281–391		cantons	

Note: R = reversed to ensure consistency (i.e., higher scores indicate more deserving). Bullet points represent single questions or sub-questions. See Appendix A1 for more details. Abbr. = Abbreviation.

welfare attitudes differ towards different unemployed groups (secondary target group level). For this, participants were randomly assigned to one of five conditions at the beginning of the survey: general unemployed (control, N = 395), young unemployed under 30 (N = 309), older unemployed over 55 (N = 292), unemployed with Swiss citizenship (N = 287) and unemployed with EU citizenship living in Switzerland (N = 316). For example, a participant in experimental condition two (young unemployed under 30) received questions about the group of young unemployed but not about the other unemployed groups. Information about which items were varied and the wording is detailed in the next section, Table 1, and Appendix A2.

The underlying rationale for the exact definitions of the conditions was based on theoretical considerations and the current institutional realities in Swiss unemployment insurance benefits (*Arbeitslosenentschädigung*). This system differentiates between younger and older unemployed, for example, in terms of benefit duration and what is defined as suitable work for these groups. On the contrary, Swiss and EU unemployed living in Switzerland are covered by the same rules once they meet the eligibility criteria. Hence, while a direct examination of policy feedback mechanisms (e.g., Laenen, 2018; Larsen, 2006, 2008a) is beyond the scope of this article, the survey experiment design allows speculative insights into whether policy differences are mirrored in young peoples' deservingness opinions and welfare attitudes.

### Survey items

The survey comprises several measurements of deservingness and welfare attitudes, thereby following calls for clearly distinguishing between *deservingness opinions* and *welfare support* (Laenen, 2020). Table 1 provides an overview of all deservingness and welfare attitude items used in the paper (for detailed wording and source of questions, see Appendix A2).

## Deservingness items

Deservingness was measured for primary and secondary target groups (unemployed groups). Starting with the unemployed groups (secondary target group level), deservingness was assessed via the public image approach<sup>8</sup> (Meuleman et al., 2020), with six single items for the CARIN criteria (*DC*).<sup>9</sup> Additionally, one item captured the overall deservingness of the specific group ( $OD_{sec}$ ). As each respondent was assigned to one unemployed group, they received only items for their group. The CARIN criteria (*DC*) for the experimental conditions were operationalised as follows:

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Below are a few statements about [unemployed people// younger unemployed people. By younger unemployed people, we mean unemployed people who are under 30 years old// older unemployed people. By older unemployed people, we mean unemployed people who are over 55 years old// unemployed people with a Swiss passport// people who have moved to Switzerland from a country in the European Union (EU) and are now unemployed.]. For each statement, indicate how much you agree or do not agree with it.

Attitude	1) Most [unemployed people// younger unemployed (under 30)// older unemployed (over 55)// unemployed with a Swiss passport// unemployed with a passport from an EU country] are not grateful enough for government support and do not appreciate it enough.
Identity	2) I personally sympathise with the fate of [experimental group].
Reciprocity Future	3) Most [exp. group] don't really try to find a job.
Reciprocity Past	4) Most [exp. group] have already contributed to society before they became unemployed.
Control	5) Most [exp. group] are to blame themselves for being unemployed.
Need	6) Most [exp. group] live in immediate need (e.g., financial).

Answer options ranged from “Do not agree at all” (1) to “Fully agree” (5).

---

Overall deservingness of the unemployed groups ( $OD_{sec}$ ) was assessed with a single item: “To what extent do most [experimental group] deserve to receive social welfare from the government?”. Answer options ranged from “Do not deserve it at all” (1) to “Fully deserve it” (5).

Items on the deservingness of primary target groups were not experimentally manipulated and answered by all participants. Deservingness was measured by asking for the overall deservingness ( $OD_{prim}$ ) of the elderly, sick, disabled, families with children, unemployed and social assistance recipients (“For each of the following groups, indicate the extent to which they deserve to receive social welfare from the government?”). Answers ranged from “Do not deserve it at all” (1) to “Fully deserve it” (5). The control group (general unemployed) did not evaluate the unemployed in  $OD_{prim}$  since they answered this question in  $OD_{sec}$ . Moreover, migrants were not included in  $OD_{prim}$  given that a migrant condition was included in *DC* and  $OD_{sec}$ , and to minimise social desirability bias in the ranking. However, it cannot be ruled out that social desirability influenced responses towards other stigmatised groups, such as social assistance recipients.

In the second survey round, an item was introduced measuring general deservingness principles (*GD*), i.e., the importance of deservingness criteria for receiving social welfare without reference to target groups. The items are strongly inspired by Meuleman et al. (2020), except for the identity criterion. This is because the identity items in the Meuleman et al. study are operationalised exclusively concerning migration, which ‘risks missing other important dimensions of identity’ (Meuleman et al., 2020, p. 11). To address this limitation,

<sup>8</sup>The public image approach measures how people evaluate target groups regarding the single deservingness criteria (Meuleman et al., 2020, p. 4–5).

<sup>9</sup>Reciprocity was measured with two items, one for past and one for future contributions (see Heuer & Zimmermann, 2020; Knotz et al., 2022; Laenen, 2020).

this study operationalises the identity criterion via various aspects of closeness, such as shared country of birth, kinship, and cultural affinity, which aligns more closely with the original definition of the criterion (van Oorschot, 2000, 2006; refer to the appendix for detailed wording):

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Now we are talking more generally about when people should receive social benefits and services. By social benefits and services, we mean things like pensions, health care, unemployment benefits, or social assistance. Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following sentences: People should receive social benefits and services when they ...

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| Control     | 1) have not caused their problems.   |
| Attitude    | 2) are grateful for the help.  |
| Reciprocity | 3) have contributed or will contribute to public prosperity in their life. |
| Identity    | 4) are close to me (e.g., same country of birth, kinship, culture, etc.).  |
| Need        | 5) are in real need (e.g., financially).                                   |

Answer options ranged from “Do not agree at all” (1) to “Fully agree” (5).

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## Welfare attitude items

The welfare attitude items focus on unemployment-related policies, and the role of the government (see Table 1). The items mainly stem from the welfare attitude module of the European Social Survey (ESS).<sup>10</sup> Additionally, three items were developed on the maximum unemployment benefit duration (*Dur*),<sup>11</sup> the maximum unemployment benefit replacement rate (*RR*), and benefit cuts in case of job refusal because the unemployed person does not want to move (*ObMove*). All welfare attitude items are experimentally modified, similarly to *DC* and *OD<sub>sec</sub>*. For example, the role of government items Living Standard (*RgLS*) and Job (*RgJob*) read:

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And to what extent should it be the government's responsibility to ...

- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| Living Standard | 1) ...ensure a reasonable standard of living for [unemployed people// younger unemployed (under 30)// older unemployed (over 55)// unemployed with a Swiss passport// unemployed with a passport from an EU country]? |
| Job             | 2) ... ensure a job for [experimental group]?   |

Answer options ranged from “No responsibility at all” (0) to “Full responsibility” (10).

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The welfare attitude items measure attitudes towards social rights (*RgLS*, *RgJob*, *Dur*, *RR*) and social obligations (*ObMove*, *ObEdu*, *OBPay*, *SI*; see table 1) to account for the multidimensionality of welfare attitudes (Roosma et al., 2013, 2014).

## Control items

Lastly, data was collected on the following control variables: age, gender, welfare state performance (living standard of unemployed, experimentally modified, scale 0–10), political

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<sup>10</sup>In some instances, the original ESS wording was slightly changed to increase comprehensibility among the participants.

<sup>11</sup>Benefit duration was asked as an open question with a hint to provide answers in months. Responses were excluded if the responses could not be coded (e.g., “twice a month”), indicated indefinite duration (e.g., “forever”), or for durations over 13 years due to the next data point being at over 41 years (outliers). These exclusions led to 76 cases being omitted but did not yield statistically significant differences across conditions. This could result in a slight underestimation of the population mean.

ideology (left–right scale),<sup>12</sup> egalitarian values (5-point Likert item), nationality (Swiss), nationality (EU), self-assessment of future job prospects (5 point scale from very unlikely to very likely), highest education of parents, self-assessment of the family's position in society (11-point numerical scale), and contact to unemployed people. All those variables relate to important explanatory frameworks in the literature on deservingness and welfare attitudes: self-interest, political ideology, political values and performance evaluations (see Laenen, 2020).

## Data analysis strategy

The article generates new insights by revisiting existing deservingness and welfare attitude results from a so far unknown young perspective. This includes the examination of the *deservingness rankings of primary target groups* (H2, H3), the comparison of *older and younger unemployed* (H4), the *inevitable deservingness gap* (H5) and the extent to which *deservingness opinions predict welfare attitudes among young people* (H1). H2 and H3 will be tested by describing the primary target group deservingness rankings ( $OD_{prim}$ ), whereby the results of the general deservingness principles (GD) are referred to for an interpretation of the results. H4 and H5 require an examination of the survey experiment. Specifically, the goal is to compare 1) the four experimental conditions to the baseline, 2) the older and younger conditions and 3) the Swiss and EU conditions for differences in deservingness opinions ( $OD_{sec}$  and DC) and welfare attitudes. Moreover, by contrasting the significant differences in deservingness between the unemployed groups with the results of the welfare attitude items, it is possible to draw initial conclusions about H1. Additionally, H1 will be analysed by investigating the relationship between deservingness opinions ( $OD_{sec}$  and DC) and welfare attitudes via linear and ordered logit regression models considering important control variables. Two baseline models were considered for the regression models: one for overall deservingness ( $OD_{sec}$ ) and one for the CARIN criteria (DC). Next, both baseline models were extended by adding the covariates described above.

To increase the robustness of results, all analyses were performed with unweighted and weighted data, and robust standard errors were used where possible (Solon et al., 2015). Additionally, in the regression analyses, multiple imputation was used to impute missing values, as it offers strong advantages over list- or pairwise deletion (Jakobsen et al., 2017; Rubin, 2004; van Buuren, 2018; van Ginkel et al., 2020; Woods et al., 2023). More details on the use of weights (e.g., raking weights calculation; see DeBell, 2018; DeBell & Krosnick, 2009) and the multiple imputation process are presented in Appendix A5 and A6.

Except for the regression analyses, all estimates, standard errors, and p-values in the following text are the ones from the weighted analyses. For the regressions, the following text and tables report the pooled imputed weighted regressions results as this approach is superior to relying only on multiple imputations (Quartagno et al., 2020). The results of all regression models (unweighted 1a-b, weighted 2a-b, weighted and imputed 3a-c) are detailed in Appendix A3 and A4. Overall, there is high consistency of results independent of the model specification of the baseline models (unweighted 1a, weighted 2a, weighted and imputed 3a) as well as the full models (unweighted 1b, weighted 2b, weighted and imputed 3b<sup>13</sup>), which speaks for the robustness of the results.

<sup>12</sup>The inclusion of the left–right scale was deemed suitable for the young participants (see also Rico & Jennings, 2016). This choice is confirmed in the analyses. For example, the weighted sample mean (4.71) is pretty much consistent with the Swiss ESS sample mean (5.03), and the left–right variable performs as expected in the regression analyses.

<sup>13</sup>Additionally, a model that included the highest socioeconomic status of parents (Hisei-08) was run (3c). However, due to a rather large Hisei missing rate (42.7%), it was only included as another specification of a full weighted & imputed model (3c) and not in the unimputed analyses to avoid introducing bias in the estimations (1b and 2b). For more details and results, see A3/A4.

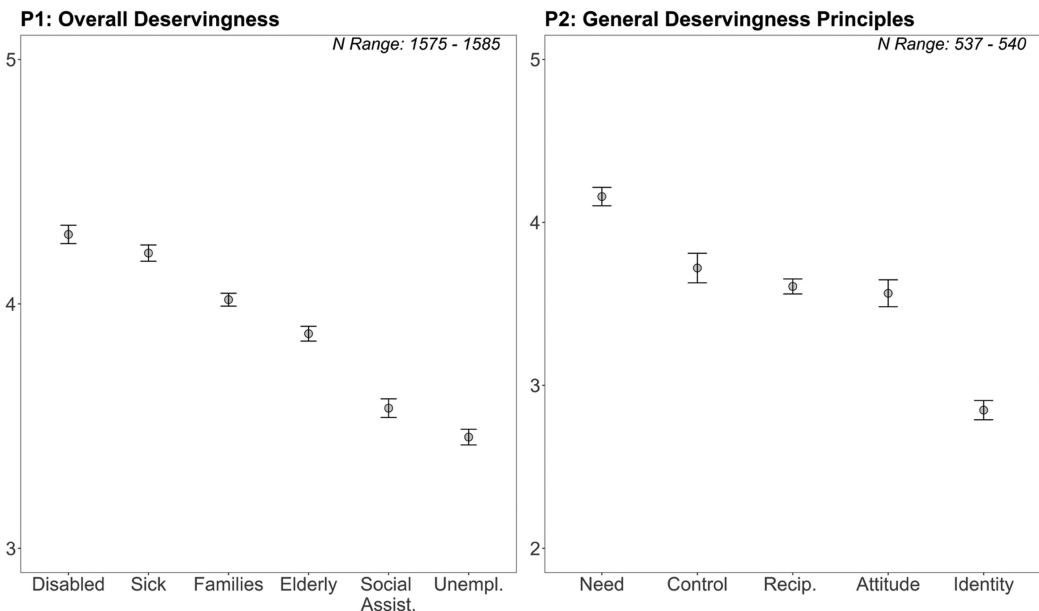
## RESULTS

**Table A1** (Appendix) displays summary statistics on the variables used in this paper. **A1** also displays reference points (e.g., means and proportions) to the most recent ESS Swiss general population samples where possible. The results section follows the outline presented in the data analysis strategy section. First, results on the overall deservingness of primary target groups ( $OD_{prim}$ ) are presented (**H2**, **H3**). This is followed by examining young people's evaluations of different unemployed groups in terms of overall deservingness ( $OD_{sec}$ ) and deservingness criteria ( $DC$ ) (**H4**, **H5**). Lastly, the section investigates to what extent *deservingness opinions* on the unemployed groups predict welfare support for unemployment-related policies (**H1**). For reasons of clarity, one subsection will focus on attitudes towards social rights (**H1a**), and one will focus on social obligations (**H1b**).

### Overall deservingness of primary target groups (**H2**, **H3**)

**Figure 1** displays an overview of the overall deservingness of different primary target groups ( $OD_{prim}$ , P1) and the general deservingness principles ( $GD$ , P2). P1 shows that deservingness considerations among Swiss youth are more about *relative* than *absolute deservingness* (Laenen, 2020), as no group averaged lower than 3 (mean range: 3.46 to 4.28 on a 5-point scale; 3 = undecided whether deserving or not deserving). This mostly mirrors patterns among adult samples (e.g., van Oorschot, 2006).

Clearer deviations from previous findings with adults are visible for the overall deservingness rank order in P1 (see Laenen & Meuleman, 2017). On an aggregate level, the disabled (mean = 4.28, SE = 0.04) and sick (mean = 4.21, SE = 0.03) are seen as most deserving, followed by families with kids (mean = 4.02, SE = 0.03), the elderly (mean = 3.88, SE = 0.03), social assistance recipients (mean = 3.57, SE = 0.04), and lastly, the unemployed (mean = 3.46, SE = 0.03). Particularly noteworthy are the relatively lower deservingness of the elderly compared to the



**FIGURE 1** Overall primary target group deservingness and general deservingness principles.

sick and disabled (*H2*) and the reversed positions of the unemployed and social assistance recipients (*H3*). These results support *H2* and *H3*, suggesting that *reciprocity* could be less relevant for adolescents who have not yet entered the labour market.

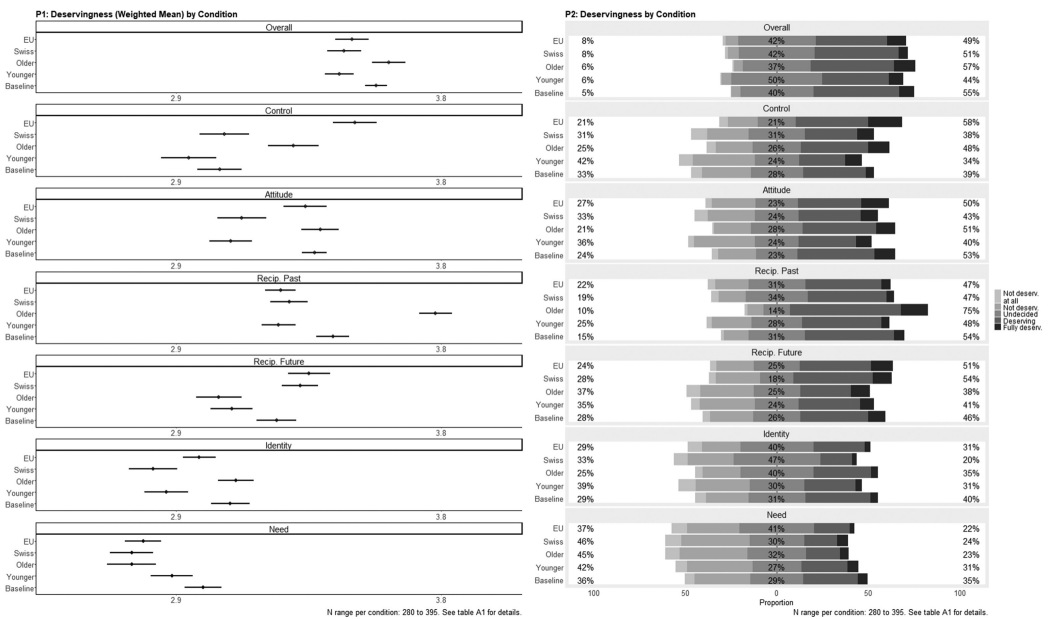
Backing for this is visible in P2, displaying the importance of the general deservingness principles (*GD*). Contrary to previous claims that *control* and *reciprocity* are the most important criteria when evaluating the deservingness of target groups (e.g., Larsen, 2006; Petersen, 2012; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017; also: de Swaan, 1988), this seems not to be the case here, at least when asked in the form of general deservingness principle. Instead, *need* has a higher mean (mean = 4.16, SE = 0.06) compared to *control* (mean = 3.72, SE = 0.09) and *reciprocity* (mean = 3.61, SE = 0.05). This suggests that Swiss adolescents might prioritise need-based assessments in deservingness considerations (see Cook & Barrett, 1992; Meuleman et al., 2020), which would explain why social assistance recipients are seen as more deserving than the unemployed. Interestingly, the *identity* criterion – operationalised via closeness (country of birth, kinship, culture) – is the least important criterion (mean = 2.85, SE = 0.06). While this stands in contrast to previous studies highlighting the important role of *identity* (e.g., Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019), social desirability might influence the result.

## Secondary target group level: Deservingness of different groups of unemployed (*H4*, *H5*)

This section evaluates the experimental items on the overall deservingness ( $OD_{sec}$ ) and deservingness criteria (*DC*) of the different unemployed groups. First, the experimental groups will be compared to the baseline condition (unemployed in general) before comparing older and younger unemployed (*H4*) and Swiss and EU unemployed (*H5*).

Figure 2 displays the results of  $OD_{sec}$  and *DC* by condition. P1 shows the means, and P2 the answer proportions (in percentage) for these questions. The overall deservingness for the different unemployed groups is not very high ( $OD_{sec}$  mean range: 3.45 to 3.62). However, it still could display too rosy a picture when not considering the individual CARIN criteria assessments (*DC*). This is particularly eminent in P2, revealing that only a small share of respondents (5–8%) saw either of the unemployed groups as not deserving at all (=1) or not deserving (=2), whereas a far more substantial share of participants assessed very low (=1) or low scorings (=2) on the different criteria (e.g., *need*: 36–46%, *control*: 21–42%). Accordingly, while overall deservingness appears largely consistent across the unemployed groups, criteria-based measurements can reveal a more fine-grained and perhaps more critical portrayal of deservingness. The lower sensitivity of  $OD_{sec}$  is also evident for the mean scores (P1), as there are no statistically significant differences in overall deservingness when comparing the experimental conditions to the baseline condition (Wald Test:  $F = 2.13$ ,  $p = 0.081$ ).<sup>14</sup> Again, a more differentiated picture is revealed for the criteria-based assessment (*DC*) as there are significant differences between the experimental conditions and the baseline condition for the *control* ( $F = 10.97$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), *attitude* ( $F = 4.67$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ), *reciprocity past* ( $F = 18.35$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), *reciprocity future* ( $F = 3.53$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) and *identity* criterion ( $F = 4.05$ ;  $p = 0.004$ ). Differences are smallest and not significant for the *need* criterion ( $F = 2.14$ ;  $p = 0.08$ ). Interesting findings regarding the *identity* criterion are visible, measured by sympathy for the fate of the specific target group. The young

<sup>14</sup>Mean differences between the experimental and baseline conditions were tested with Wald tests based on weighted general linear models (deservingness ~ condition) using the baseline as a reference category. The p-level was adjusted in the post-hoc tests to account for multiple pairwise comparisons (baseline–young/baseline–older/baseline–Swiss/baseline–EU; see false discovery rate: Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995).



**FIGURE 2** Panel: Overall and criteria-based deservingness.

Note: The overall deservingness scores are from 1 = Not deserving to 5 = fully deserving. For the criteria, the survey measures agreement to statements indicating the degree of deservingness.

and Swiss conditions score lowest in the aggregate mean, although they are ‘closest’ to the average respondent.

## Older and younger unemployed

When comparing how young people see older and younger unemployed, the results largely mirror previous adult-focused studies. Older unemployed are seen as significantly more deserving than younger unemployed in terms of overall deservingness ( $OD_{sec}$ ;  $T = 2.20$ ,  $p = 0.030$ ), supporting *H4*. The criteria-based assessments (*DC*) reveal that those differences are driven by significant differences in *control* ( $T = 2.721$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ), *attitude* ( $T = 3.212$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), *reciprocity past* ( $T = 6.131$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and *identity* ( $T = 3.475$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The biggest difference is visible for *reciprocity past*, i.e., older unemployed are seen as having contributed significantly more to society than younger unemployed. In line with the expectations formulated in the hypothesis section, no significant differences are visible for the *need* criterion.

## EU and Swiss unemployed

The biggest deviation from previous literature with adults can be found in the comparison of Swiss and EU unemployed living in Switzerland, as no *migrant deservingness penalty* is visible. The analysis displays no significant difference regarding the overall deservingness between the EU and Swiss conditions ( $OD_{sec}$ ;  $T = 0.341$ ,  $p = 0.734$ ), starkly contradicting *H5*. On the contrary, when evaluating the CARIN criteria (*DC*), the EU unemployed even score significantly higher regarding the *control* criterion ( $T = 4.685$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This means that Swiss youth perceive EU unemployed living in Switzerland as less responsible for being unemployed than

the Swiss unemployed. Moreover, although not statistically significant, a similar trend is observable for the *attitude* criterion ( $T = 1.934$ ,  $p = 0.056$ ), i.e., EU unemployed are perceived to be more grateful for received help.

## Deservingness as a predictor of welfare attitudes on social rights (H1a)

This section examines whether young people rely on deservingness considerations to inform their welfare attitudes on social rights (*H1a*). Figure 3 presents a panel of welfare attitude items on the role of government in providing a decent living standard for the unemployed groups (*RgLS*), in providing a job (*RgJob*), the maximum unemployment benefit duration (*Dur*) and the maximum unemployment benefit replacement rate (*RR*). While it should be somehow the government's responsibility to provide jobs and a decent living standard for the different unemployed groups (mean scores of *RgLS*, *RgJob* > 5), it is not a top priority. Moreover, the maximum duration and replacement rate are clearly below current norms (24 months, 70/80%).

Interestingly, the significant differences in deservingness presented in the last section are largely reflected in the significant differences in the welfare attitude items, providing preliminary support for *H1a*. In line with perceptions that older unemployed are significantly more deserving than younger unemployed, the government is seen as significantly more responsible for providing a decent living standard for older unemployed than younger unemployed (*RgLS*;  $T = 2.253$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ), and older unemployed should receive significantly higher replacement rates (*RR*;  $T = 1.988$ ,  $p = 0.0497$ ). Attitudes towards the EU/Swiss comparison also align with the significant differences in deservingness but in a slightly different way. Youth sees the government as significantly more responsible for providing jobs for the EU unemployed than the Swiss unemployed (*RgJob*;  $T = 2.567$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). Thus, the participants propose a ‘corrective’

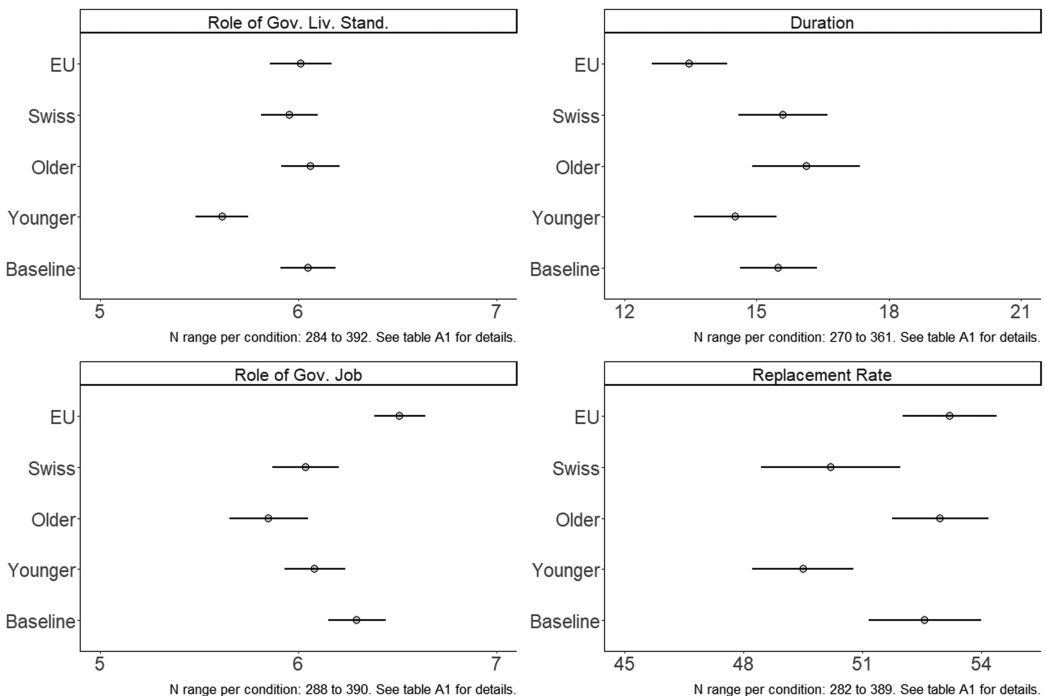


FIGURE 3 Attitudes on social rights (secondary target group level: unemployed).

mechanism fitting their perception that the EU unemployed are less responsible for being unemployed than the Swiss unemployed (*control*).

The regression analyses further support hypothesis *H1a*, revealing significant associations between deservingness opinions and welfare attitudes on social rights (see Appendix A3 for the results of all models). Figure 4 displays a panel showing estimates and confidence intervals of the full imputed weighted regression models (model 3b, Appendix A3) for both deservingness measurements ( $OD_{sec}$ ,  $DC$ ) on the social rights items. P1 presents the results for overall deservingness ( $OD_{sec}$ ) and P2 for the CARIN criteria ( $DC$ ). Even after accounting for covariates, overall deservingness (P1) is a significant predictor of replacement rates ( $b=2.91$ ,  $SE=0.74$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), benefit duration ( $b=2.16$ ,  $SE=0.65$ ,  $p<0.001$ ),  $RgLS$  ( $b=0.67$ ,  $SE=0.10$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and  $RgJob$  ( $b=0.30$ ,  $SE=0.08$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). For all social rights items, higher overall deservingness is significantly associated with more generous attitudes.

P2 shows what CARIN criteria ( $DC$ ) might cause the significant relationship between overall deservingness and welfare attitudes on social rights. The importance of the individual criteria varies for the different welfare attitude items. For example, the full model (including all covariates, 3b) displays a significant relationship between the replacement rate item and the *control* ( $b=1.52$ ,  $SE=0.46$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), *reciprocity past* ( $b=1.88$ ,  $SE=0.64$ ,  $p=0.003$ ) and *future* ( $b=2.06$ ,  $SE=0.53$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) criteria. Higher scorings on those criteria are associated with significantly higher replacement rates. The latter aligns with the contribution-based nature of unemployment insurance benefits. However, despite a significant effect of overall deservingness, there is no independent single criterion effect on unemployment benefit duration. Regarding the role of government items, the analyses display statistically significant associations between  $RgLS$  and scorings on *control* ( $b=0.25$ ,  $SE=0.06$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), *reciprocity past* ( $b=0.22$ ,  $SE=0.10$ ,  $p=0.02$ ), *future* ( $b=0.26$ ,  $SE=0.06$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and *identity* ( $b=0.22$ ,  $SE=0.07$ ,  $p=0.002$ ).  $RgJob$

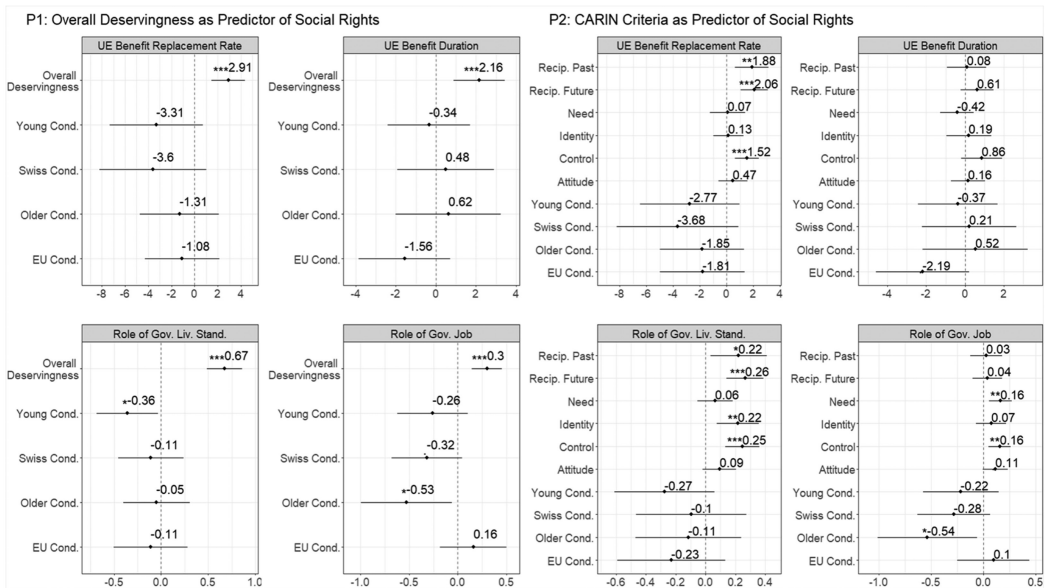


FIGURE 4 Deservingness as a predictor of attitudes on social rights (secondary target group level: unemployed).

Note: The estimates are based on full models, including these covariates: condition, age, gender, welfare state performance (living standard unemployed; exp. modified), political ideology (left–right), egalitarian values, nationality (Swiss; EU), self-assessment job prospects, highest education of parents (hed), self-assessment of the family's position in society, and contact to unemployed people.

is significantly associated with the *control* ( $b=0.16$ ,  $SE=0.05$ ,  $p=0.004$ ) and *need* ( $b=0.16$ ,  $SE=0.06$ ,  $p=0.004$ ) criteria. Only the *attitude* criterion is not significantly associated with any social rights item mirroring previous results with adults (see Knötz et al., 2022), although the threshold is nearly reached for *RgJob* ( $b=0.11$ ,  $SE=0.06$ ,  $p=0.062$ ).

### Deservingness opinions as a predictor of welfare attitudes towards social obligations (H1b)

This section examines whether deservingness opinions also guide welfare attitudes on social obligations (H1b), following the analytical approach from the previous section. Figure 5 presents preferences for social obligations by condition, including three questions on the financial consequences of refusing a job offer and one item on social investment (reduce benefit level to increase spending on training and education, *SI*). In line with the rather low deservingness of the unemployed groups, most respondents see at least some cut in benefit payments as an appropriate measure if a job is rejected because it is paid worse (*ObPay*) or due to requiring a lower educational level (*ObEdu*). Interestingly, Swiss adolescents are much more lenient if a job is refused because it would require moving (*ObMove*). There is no significant variation for the three items between the experimental conditions and the baseline (*ObPay*:  $F=0.444$ ,  $p=0.776$ ; *ObEdu*:  $F=1.655$ ,  $p=0.166$ ; *ObMove*:  $F=0.567$ ,  $p=0.686$ ). The same applies to the older/younger and Swiss/EU comparisons, where the design-based Kruskal Wallis tests yield no statistically significant differences.

For the social investment item, the Wald test shows significant differences between the experimental conditions and the baseline ( $F=3.487$ ,  $p=0.010$ ), mostly stemming from differences between the baseline and the older unemployed condition. Swiss adolescents are less in favour of reducing benefit levels to increase spending on training and education for older unemployed people than for unemployed people in general. The same is true when comparing older with younger unemployed people (Kruskal Wallis:  $T=-2.522$ ,  $p=0.013$ ). While such a tendency is also visible for the EU/Swiss conditions, it is not statistically significant ( $T=1.530$ ,  $p=0.13$ ).

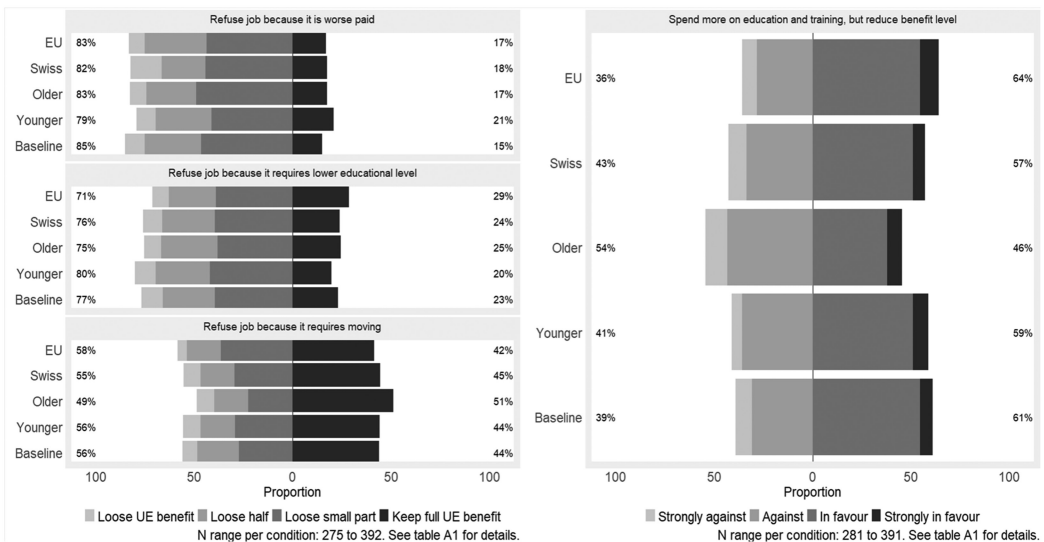


FIGURE 5 Attitudes on social obligations (secondary target group level: unemployed).

Accordingly, other than for the social rights items, the significant differences in deservingness are only partly mirrored by significant differences in the obligation items.

However, the regression results in most cases reveal a significant association between *deservingness opinions* and attitudes towards social obligations, supporting *H1b* (see Appendix A4). More specifically, higher deservingness is associated with a higher probability of preferring less strict obligations, i.e., lower benefit cuts in case of job refusal. Figure 6 displays a panel showing the estimates and confidence intervals of the full imputed weighted regression models (3b, Appendix A4) for both deservingness measurements on social obligations. P1 shows results for overall deservingness ( $OD_{sec}$ ) and P2 for the single CARIN criteria ( $DC$ ).

Overall deservingness (P1,  $OD_{sec}$ ) is significantly associated with a higher likelihood of preferring less strict benefit cuts in case of job refusal due to lower payment ( $ObPay$ :  $b=0.37$ ,  $SE=0.07$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and lower educational level ( $ObEdu$ :  $b=0.27$ ,  $SE=0.08$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The same is not true for refusing a job because it would require moving ( $ObMove$ :  $b=0.12$ ,  $SE=0.08$ ,  $p=0.164$ ). However, when considering the CARIN criteria ( $CD$ ) instead of overall deservingness (see P2),  $ObMove$  is significantly associated with *reciprocity past* ( $b=0.18$ ,  $SE=0.07$ ,  $p=0.007$ ), *future* ( $b=0.17$ ,  $SE=0.06$ ,  $p=0.003$ ) and *control* ( $b=0.12$ ,  $SE=0.06$ ,  $p=0.032$ ).  $ObPay$  is significantly associated with *reciprocity past* ( $b=0.12$ ,  $SE=0.06$ ,  $p=0.024$ ) and *future* ( $b=0.12$ ,  $SE=0.06$ ,  $p=0.048$ ).  $ObEdu$  is significantly associated with *reciprocity future* ( $b=0.11$ ,  $SE=0.05$ ,  $p=0.028$ ). Thus, different from social rights, attitudes toward benefit cuts are primarily guided by *reciprocity* and *control*.

No statistically significant relationship exists between overall or criteria-based deservingness and *SI*. A potential explanation might be that reducing unemployment benefits to increase spending on training and education must not necessarily be understood as an obligation but could be seen as a positive measure to reintegrate unemployed people into the labour market.

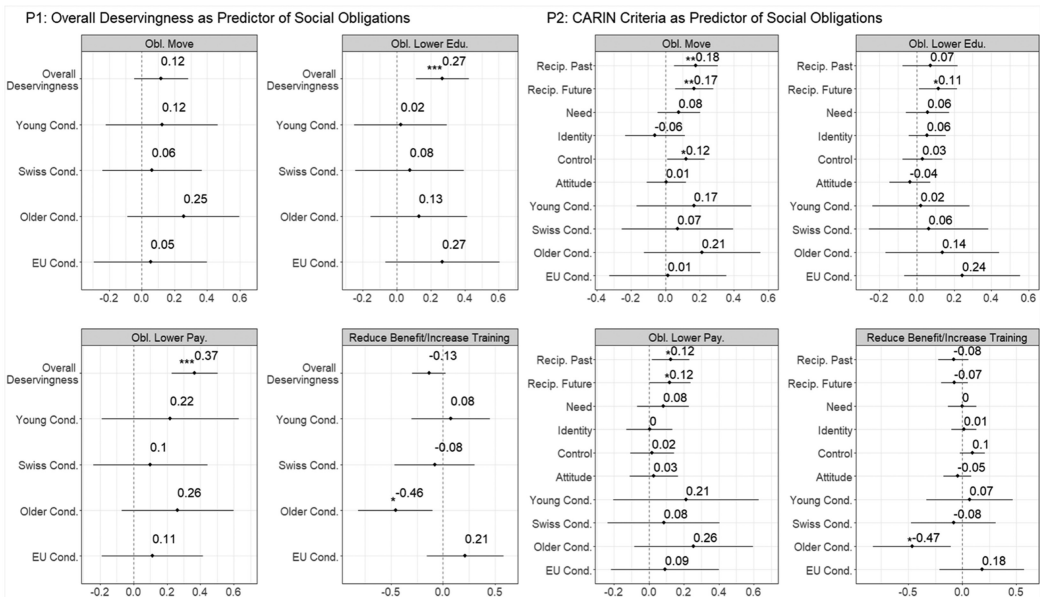


FIGURE 6 Deservingness as a predictor of attitudes on social obligations (secondary target group level: unemployed).

Note: The estimates are based on full models, including these covariates: condition, age, gender, welfare state performance (living standard unemployed; exp. modified), political ideology (left–right), egalitarian values, nationality (Swiss; EU), self-assessment job prospects, highest education of parents (hed), self-assessment of the family's position in society, and contact to unemployed people.

Overall, when excluding the social investment item, the data indicate a statistically strong association between Swiss youths' deservingness opinions and welfare attitudes regarding social rights and obligations. Moreover, while higher deservingness is associated with higher generosity and less strict obligations, the criteria driving those effects differ per policy. Only the *attitude* criterion showed no independent statistically significant effect on any attitude item.

Lastly, the associations between deservingness and welfare attitudes (social rights and obligations) hold when controlling for important covariates. However, this does not mean that other explanatory frameworks (e.g., self-interest and political values) are *outweighed*, as many significant associations exist. While a detailed examination of the effect of these frameworks is beyond the scope of this article, interesting patterns emerge, requiring further investigation in future studies. For example, while egalitarian values are significantly associated with most attitudes towards social rights (*Dur*, *RgLS*, *RgJob*) across model specifications and for both deservingness measurements, this seems less true for attitudes on social obligations. Left–right positioning seems more relevant there as it is significantly associated with two of the three obligation items (*ObMove*, *ObEdu*). Significant associations of the self-interest variables with the attitude items are less pronounced (see Appendix A3 and A4).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper investigates deservingness opinions and welfare attitudes of adolescents in the German-speaking part of Switzerland (N = 1601, mean age: 14.6). Starting with the key findings, this is the first study to explicitly show that underaged young people rely on deservingness considerations in decisions on welfare support. The overall deservingness of the unemployed is a significant predictor of welfare attitudes towards social rights and obligations, even when controlling for performance evaluations, self-interest and political values. Higher overall deservingness is associated with support for more generous benefits and a higher probability of supporting less strict obligations. While attitudes on social rights seem to be driven by different deservingness criteria (*control*, *reciprocity*, *identity*, *need*), attitudes on social obligations are only significantly predicted by the *control* and *reciprocity* criteria. The *attitude* criterion is the only CARIN item without a significant effect in the regression analyses.

At the aggregate level, the participants clearly differentiate between the deservingness of different primary target groups, whereby the elderly are perceived as somewhat less deserving than in adult-centred studies. Deservingness varies less for the unemployed groups included in the survey experiment (secondary target group level). Nevertheless, the results show significant differences in line with previous adult-centred research: older unemployed are considered more deserving than younger unemployed. At the same time, in contrast to previous results, the migrant condition (EU unemployed living in Switzerland) is not perceived as less deserving than the non-migrant condition (Swiss unemployed). On the contrary, EU unemployed are seen as significantly less responsible for being unemployed (*control*). Interestingly, the significant differences seem to *translate* differently into welfare attitudes: The government should be more responsible for providing higher living standards and replacement rates for older than younger unemployed. In contrast, the government should be more responsible for providing jobs for the EU unemployed than the Swiss unemployed.

The survey results have important implications. Young people's reliance on deservingness considerations in welfare support decisions supports arguments that the deservingness heuristic could indeed be deeply entrenched in our evolutionary past (Petersen, 2012, 2015; Petersen et al., 2012). However, further support for this claim requires involving even younger participants and expanding the geographical scope within and beyond Switzerland. Moreover, this conclusion ties back to a fundamental assumption of this paper and current deservingness models (Laenen, 2020; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017): that deservingness opinions causally

precede welfare attitudes. While plausible, it is also conceivable that policy support influences how deserving we see target groups (see Cook & Barrett, 1992; Larsen, 2006). Disentangling the causal effects is an unresolved task for future studies, which should be dealt with to refine the deservingness theory.

Methodologically, the results imply that it seems right to distinguish between deservingness and welfare support (Laenen, 2020). Moreover, criteria-based assessments offer a more fine-grained picture of deservingness, which is particularly valuable when investigating secondary target groups. Still, more research is necessary on the operationalisation of deservingness. For example, although *attitude* had no significant independent effect on welfare attitudes, it could be too hasty to drop it from the deservingness model (but see: Knotz et al., 2022). After all, *attitude* ranked on par with *reciprocity* and *control* when asked as a general deservingness principle.

Moreover, future research should also more explicitly investigate the role of other explanatory frameworks like self-interest or political values in shaping young people's welfare attitudes, which was beyond the scope of this article. The significant and consistent role of political values as a predictor in the regression analyses suggests that relevant insights can be gained from such research.

This is also true for political knowledge and awareness as an underexplored explanatory framework of deservingness opinions and welfare attitudes (see Jordan, 2023; Sowula, 2024). After all, the deservingness differences between older and younger unemployed and less stark differences between EU and Swiss unemployed pretty much mirror institutional realities for unemployment insurance benefits in Switzerland. This raises questions about potential policy feedback effects (Laenen, 2018; Larsen, 2006, 2008a). However, attributing those differences to policy feedback requires critical assumptions: that participants are aware of such nuanced policy differences and, if so, that such knowledge feeds back into people's deservingness opinions.

Political knowledge and numerical competencies might also explain the answers for particular items (see Ansolabehere et al., 2013). For example, the participants called for replacement rates (mean range: 49.5–53.2%) far below existing norms in Switzerland. Answering such numerical items without an anchor might thus be too difficult for (young) people, raising questions about whether young people really want this level of unemployment protection. At the same time, valuable insights are gained from this item as the participants clearly expressed who should get higher or lower replacement rates, reflecting meaningful attitudes.

For the less technical and numerical items, it becomes even clearer that the young people in this study have meaningful views. They avoid choosing only the middle and neutral options and display consistent patterns, going well beyond 'non-attitudes' (see Converse, 2006 [1964]). A prime example of this is that the participants not only perceive a problem (EU unemployed are seen as less in control of being unemployed than Swiss unemployed) but they also propose a solution: the government should be more responsible for providing jobs for the EU unemployed than for the Swiss unemployed.

Finally, what can we learn from these deservingness opinions and welfare attitudes about the future of the welfare state? Answering this first requires acknowledging some study limitations, like the focus on youth in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The results may thus not be directly generalisable to youth across other regions or countries. Previous studies on the different cultural and language areas in Switzerland alone suggest variation in work attitudes and demand for social welfare (Eugster et al., 2011, 2017), which might also be true for young people's deservingness opinions and welfare attitudes. Moreover, the results represent only a snapshot in time. Identifying what differences might *fade* as the participants age (age effects) and what results might signal aspects of a new *zeitgeist* (cohort effects) requires involving more age groups over time. Nevertheless, interesting insights can already be derived at this stage, which could set the basis for future cohort and longitudinal studies.

First, the lower overall deservingness of the elderly and the reversed ranking of the unemployed and social assistance recipients imply a lower emphasis on *reciprocity*. While this might change when the respondents enter the labour market, this still does not mean that the picture of a highly deserving elderly will persist in the future, given increasingly ageing societies (Kweon & Choi, 2021; Naumann et al., 2020). Generational conflicts over resources (e.g., pensions, the housing market) and differences in attitudes on pressing issues like climate change (e.g., Milfont et al., 2021; Poortinga et al., 2023) might cause a re-evaluation of the elderly's deservingness among younger generations.

Second, the results reveal a complex role of the *identity* criterion. Those groups 'closest' to the average respondent (Swiss and young unemployed) are assessed most critically regarding sympathy, contrasting what one would expect from a self-interest perspective (see Sherif, 1988). Studies should thus evaluate how young people conceive the *identity* criterion and how important it is for them. Moreover, the regressions reveal that the age-based framing of the experimental conditions evokes stronger effects than nationality-based framing, raising questions on the susceptibility of young people to different framings of deservingness (see Petersen et al., 2011; Slothuus, 2007).

Lastly, the comparison of Swiss and EU unemployed is worth discussing. Swiss adolescents do not perceive the EU unemployed as less deserving than the Swiss unemployed; the EU unemployed are even seen as less in control of being unemployed. One explanation might be the comparably harder labour market challenges for migrants than non-migrants (see Kogan, 2006). Young people who have not entered the labour market might not conceive this context in terms of potentially lower future contributions (*reciprocity*) but rather in terms of *control*: migrants are seen as less responsible for their hardship. Another potential explanation is tied to young peoples' concept of *identity*. The results suggest that youth in German-speaking Switzerland might apply a broader understanding of solidarity going beyond national borders. In turn, this leaves hope that even in an environment where migration is hotly debated, the coming generations might overcome the *inevitable deservingness gap* (see Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019). And even if this is a fallacy and the attitudes of the same respondents look different in ten years, further research could benefit greatly from pinpointing more precisely the turning points at which a change in attitudes occurs. More research is needed here, including young people of different ages and from a wider geographical scope within and beyond Switzerland to represent different contexts. Moreover, future research should also focus on other migration groups, which might be portrayed even less favourably in the media and by politicians (e.g., non-EU migrants or refugees).

Overall, it is evident that there is much to explore, and interesting insights are to be gained from investigating young people's deservingness opinions and welfare attitudes. Hopefully, this study serves as a catalyst for further research on the views of the younger demographic. It demonstrates that focusing more on young people in the *impressionable years* can improve our understanding of the social legitimacy of the welfare state by clarifying the deservingness-welfare support link. Moreover, such research might provide a snapshot of the current climate or *zeitgeist*, indicating potential directions for the future of the welfare state. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, young people seem to have meaningful views that policymakers should consider. Doing so could boost political and policy legitimacy among young people, helping alleviate the vicious circle of youth political alienation (Stockemer & Sundström, 2023). After all, the journey to shape the welfare states of tomorrow should begin by listening to the voices of those who will carry forth the legacy of today's decisions.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Anonymised data and metadata will be made available in a repository after the associated project concludes in February 2025.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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